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REVIEW

EVONNE LEVY, *BAROQUE AND THE POLITICAL LANGUAGE OF FORMALISM (1845–1945): BURCKHARDT, WÖLFFLIN, GURLITT, BRINCKMANN, SEDLMAYR*

BASEL: SCHWABE VERLAG, 2015, 400 PP.

For a long time the assessment of the Baroque was unfavourable. The attitude of art history towards this period changed only gradually, starting from the last quarter of the nineteenth century. And the history of the research on this style has not yet been written. Evonne Levy, a scholar known for her publications on Jesuit art[1], among others, in the present book has not risen to this challenge, either. Her objective was only to show, how, and under what circumstances in Germany, 'the art and architecture of a historical period passed from being "bad" to being "good", and how the bases for such judgments were fundamentally political' (p. 31). The author restricted her study to architecture and, in keeping with the title, on the one hand, to the period of a hundred years between the publication of Jacob Burckhardt's entry *Jesuitenstil* in the Brockhaus *Conversations-Lexikon* (1845) and the fall of the Third Reich (1945), and on the other, to discussing the political dimension of the study of the Baroque.

Evonne Levy has carried out her plan very consistently. Her book, although actually made up of five autonomous case studies dealing with formalistically oriented scholars, is very logically structured. According to the author, the above-mentioned Burckhardt's entry started not only the mere discussion of seventeenth-century architecture in Germany, seen as a creation of the Jesuits, but its negative assessment was owed to the heated political debates held in Switzerland in the 1840s because of the planned settlement of the Jesuit Order in the Canton of Lucerne (realised in 1845). Next, Levy demonstrated that Burckhardt changed his attitude to the period under discussion during his lifetime, first reaching the conclusion that not all art of the seventeenth century was Jesuit art, and combining the Baroque with the Renaissance in his well-known claim from the *Cicerone*: 'Baroque architecture speaks the same language as the Renaissance but in a dialect gone wild' (p. 60), then, in the *Kulturkampf* period, considering this style to be Roman Catholic (stemming from the Counter-Reformation) and favouring it in opposition to Bismarck's Protestant attacks. The discussion of Burckhardt may be treated as a kind of 'exposition', that is, a presentation of the most important threads that will be elaborated on further in the book: the role of the Jesuits, the Counter-Reformation, the evaluation of the Baroque as a style and its relationship towards the Renaissance.

The next chapter was devoted to Heinrich Wölfflin, in whose publications the associations with politics were not so self-evident. But Levy tried to trace political thinking, impressed in the – seemingly – purely formalist terms used to describe and characterise works of art, also in Wölfflin's works. In his *Renaissance und Barock*, the interpretation of the Baroque as a style in which individual parts had lost their autonomy and became subordinated to the 'whole', thus turning into an expression of the oppressive 'form of state' in which the citizens are no longer individuals but merely elements of a certain *Einheit*, reached, according to Levy, a political dimension. Starting from the *Classical Art* and ending with the *Principles of Art History*, Wölfflin, in Levy's telling, concentrated on sociopolitical problems, demonstrating that the classical style of the Renaissance, in its use of the linear means of

[1] E. Levy, *Propaganda and the Jesuit Baroque*, Berkeley, CA, 2004.

expression that clearly determined and separated from one another the individual elements of the composition (including human figures), represented the then current layering of the society into closed and fixed classes (or *Schichten*, layers), whereas the Baroque style, which employed 'painterly' ambiguity, rendered a social structure 'deprecating a clear sense of hierarchy' (p. 140). Levy based her interpretation of the Swiss scholar's reasoning on his notes in which such claims as 'the idea of the state is a form which tries to work its way into material' (p. 114) and 'Study the structure of society. Without this everything hangs in the air' (p. 119) appear. Situating the discussion of Wölfflin immediately after a chapter devoted to Burckhardt was very logical. Apart from the fact that the two retained a master-pupil relationship, Wölfflin was also one of the fathers of mature formalist art history. Furthermore, as he dealt mostly with European art, and only occasionally with the German one, his discussion of the Baroque assumed the attribute of universality. And even when in his later years he wrote about the difference between the German and Italian sense of form, he did not derive the specificity of *das deutsche Formgefühl* from the 'national spirit' but argued, following Friedrich Meinecke, that it 'was formed [...] by conflict and exchange with neighbors' (p. 146).

In chapter three, which discusses the trilogy of Cornelius Gurlitt, the political dimension of studies on the Baroque was given an even more solid substantiation. First of all, the formal aspects of architecture in the work of the Dresden scholar were unequivocally linked with their political meaning. Levy quotes fragments of Gurlitt's texts in which he claimed that a difference between the Renaissance and the Baroque consisted in the fact than in the former the form was constructed of individual parts, whereas in the latter all elements were subordinated to the whole, which was the result of the domination of 'large, discrete, autocratic corporations and people' (p. 196). The *Geschichte des Barockstiles* presented the development of architecture in the most important artistic centres, concluding (in volume three) with the discussion of the Baroque in Germany. From the point of view of the political meaning of style, this last part was the most important because it demonstrated how, after 1648, the imported Italianate architecture (including the negatively assessed *Jesuitenstil*) gradually adopted local features and, at the end of the century, acquired its own stylistic flavour: in the south, in Roman Catholic buildings constructed by architects of German origin, and in the Protestant Prussia, in the work of Andreas Schlüter, which reached the highest artistic level countrywide. According to the author, Gurlitt, in his *Geschichte des Barockstiles und des Rococo in Deutschland*, alluded to the views of Heinrich von Treitschke who, in his *Deutsche Geschichte*, described the historical events of the seventeenth century as a struggle of Germanic countries to recover from the trauma of the Thirty Years War, then their gradual reconstruction, culminating in the hegemony of Prussia, which was supposed to serve as a clear analogy to the emergence of the Second Reich in 1871, the development of the German Empire under the leadership of Prussia, and the dominant role of Protestantism in the *Kulturkampf* period. The discussion of Gurlitt opens up the main path of Levy's book and therefore it follows the analysis of Wölfflin, even though the first volume of the *Geschichte des Barockstiles* had appeared a year before the *Renaissance und Barock*. In Gurlitt's trilogy, the architectural form acquired a distinctly political meaning and the Baroque became a German style (Catholic in the south and Protestant in the north) which – thanks to the thesis on the similarity between processes taking place in the seventeenth and at the end of the nineteenth century – combined the past with the present.

Undoubtedly, it was the work of Albert Erich Brinckmann, presented in chapter four, that was the most political in character. The author of the *Geist der Nationen* was not only an academic, but also a journalist and publicist, member of the *Hilfstelle* in Holland in service of German propaganda during the First World War. Many of his publications defended the value and asserted individuality of German art in polemic with French scholars, mainly Émile Mâle. The Baroque was in his opinion an expression of German spirit because it conveyed its 'soul', that is, the most important characteristics of this nation (just as classicism embodied French rationalism and the Renaissance incarnated Italian sensuality). Brinckmann who, as Levy repeatedly states, was an opportunist, in the Third Reich became close to the Nazis and associated the Baroque with the then ruling ideology, interpreting the 'subordination' of architectural forms as an indication of submission to a leading force of some kind. Thus, he effectively and ultimately re-evaluated this style, assessing it entirely favourably and associating it with German national spirit, and in Hitler's times, endowing it with features typical of authoritarian art.

The book's last chapter deals with the most controversial figure, namely, Hans Sedlmayr. Taking into account the significant contribution of this scholar to the emergence and development of the so-called younger Vienna School of Art History, and at the same time, his later self-evident flirtation with National Socialism, the author accurately reconstructed his methodological attitude and studies on the Baroque in the 1920s, revealing that in his Gestalt-inspired *Strukturanalyse* no elements of political thinking could be found. All the more conspicuous, against this background, are, according to Levy, his papers from the late 1930s dealing with the Austrian Baroque and the conception of the *Reichsstil* developed in them: 'With the *Reichsstil* essay Sedlmayr abandoned, to a great extent, the structural analysis he had defended until 1936 for a political instrumentalization of the Austrian Baroque' (p. 337). The conception of the imperial style was supposed to demonstrate that the specifically German version of the Baroque originated in Austria, in the residential (and not ecclesiastical!) architecture of Johann Bernhardt Fischer von Erlach. In this way, Sedlmayr was

able to play up the role of his home country within the pan-Germanic commonwealth propagated by the Nazis, and at the same time, 'The *Reichsstil* solved Germany's baroque "problem", which Gurlitt had wrestled with in his trilogy and which Brinckmann carried on in two ways. First, it located the origins of the Baroque outside Germany – alleviating the German anxiety that it had been a passive recipient of a foreign Baroque – by positing the birthplace of the baroque in Austria and also in a later moment, one of political strength, not weakness. The *Reichsstil* also settled the problem of religion [...]. Though many of Germany's most prominent baroque structures were churches and monasteries, in the new political order of the late seventeenth-century Holy Roman Empire, Sedlmayr argued, the most important task for architecture was the design, not of churches, but of the schloss, seat of imperial power' (p. 338).

Evonne Levy's book reveals the links between politics and formalist art history – which, in principle, was focused on the stylistic changes in art – and does it very profoundly. The author juxtaposed, with utmost diligence, the texts of German art historians with the works of contemporary historians and political writers, and analysed the role of the ideological background of the period in which they functioned, and, by resorting to material from private archives, reconstructed their personal choices, doubts and decisions. The image that emerges from the five case studies encourages the reader to reflect on some general issues. First of all, the assembled material makes one ponder, once again, the question whether a scholar of art may remain locked inside an ivory tower. The answer is obvious: current events often force him to deal with topics related with contemporary politics. By using his knowledge, he may become – as Aby Warburg called Burckhardt – 'the seismograph', able to identify in the processes under way the dangers known from the past.[2] He may also deal with topics deriving from the current politics, either for the purposes of overt propaganda (as in the case of Brinckmann) or ideology (as did Sedlmayr), or still for apologetics or criticism. In the latter case, he usually simply re-evaluates a certain historical period, the output of a given artist or some phenomena from the past, and sees them through the prism of the current trends in philosophy, world outlook or politics. In this way, Gurlitt saw in the German Baroque the processes analogous to those that were taking place before his own eyes in the German Empire reborn. Outside the scope of Levy's book, one may see nowadays the Polish Baroque – depending on the political stance of the viewer – either as a period of patriotic surges and defence of Catholicism, that is, a positive model worthy of imitation and an important source of national identity, or as an era of progressing anarchy and destruction of the state, being negative elements of the Polish character.

But the book begs also another question: what are the limits of political infiltration of knowledge? Can political subtext be found in every terminology used for the analysis of works of art? While reading Levy's book such doubts are raised mainly in the case of Wölfflin. In conclusion of the part devoted to the *Renaissance und Barock*, the author wrote: 'Wölfflin's notebooks suggest strongly' that in his book the political system was not an 'unconscious of formalism', but was consciously 'represented' (p. 116). But, having read the work of the Swiss scholar, one has to admit that this conclusion is barely tenable. First of all, his notes are very general and do not point to any particular way in which Wölfflin understood the idea of the state as a form which impressed its mark in the matter. Furthermore, as Levy has noted, in the entire *Renaissance und Barock* not a single occurrence of the word 'state' appears (p. 112). Apart from that, the contrast between the Renaissance principles of constructing the architectural form, resulting in a 'co-ordination', that is, equal treatment of all constituent elements, and the Baroque 'subordination', with individual parts being deprived of autonomy for the sake of the whole – which seems to be crucial from the author's point of view – did not, in fact, constitute the essence of Wölfflin's characteristic of these styles. Finally, nowhere in the *Renaissance und Barock* is there a suggestion that 'a powerful, oppressive, subordinating baroque superstructure' and the 'German Grossstaat' of Bismarck's times were related in any way (p. 112). Wölfflin, who at the end of *Die Gründe der Stilwandlung* mused on the relationship of his own times with the Baroque, declared that both epochs were dominated by similar *affects*, which can be summarised by the lyrics of Isolde's aria from Richard Wagner's music drama *Tristan and Isolde*: 'ertrinken – versinken – unbewusst – höchste Lust'.[3] These affects could hardly be interpreted politically. What is more, the scholar explained their meaning and their relationship with the artistic form only a few lines up: 'Die Sehnsucht der Seele, im Unendlichen sich auszuschwelgen, kann in der begrenzten Form, im Einfachen und Übersichtlichen keine Befriedigung finden. Das halb geschlossene Auge ist nicht mehr empfänglich für den Reiz der schönen Linie, man verlangt nach dumpferen Wirkungen: die überwältigende Grösse, die unbegrenzte Weite des Raumes, das unfassbare Zauber des Lichtes, das sind die Ideale der neuen Kunst'.[4] Relinquishing the use of equally treated elements in the Baroque, in favour of subordinating them to a dominant whole was aimed at eliciting the feeling of infinite space and overwhelming grandeur, but not of the oppression of the state. This device was supposed to be used by the Jesuit (that is, Counter-Reformation) piety focused on the 'grenzlose Himmelsräume', which

[2] Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante. Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*, Paris, 2002, pp. 117–127.

[3] H. Wölfflin, *Renaissance und Barock. Eine Untersuchung über Wesen und Entstehung des Barockstils in Italien*, Munich, 1888, p. 73.

[4] Ibidem, p. 73.

subordinated 'das Recht des Individuums der Idee des Ganzen'.[5] This excessive affectation was, additionally, considered by Wölfflin as the sign of the times in which art was in decline, and it was on the feeling of excessive affectation, a kind of intoxication and agitation being the result of passing, that he based his parallel between the Baroque and the present; he assessed the latter critically precisely because of its spiritual anxiety: the excessively quick pace of life, nervousness and lack of classical harmony.[6]

While substantiating the political meaning of the language used to describe buildings, Evonne Levy reminded about architectural metaphors and the problem of the relationship between the whole and parts in the theory of the state, starting from Aristotle to Hippolyte Taine. But, from the fact that the Stagiryte defined state as 'a composite thing, in the same sense as another of the things that are wholes but consists of many parts' (p. 18), it does not follow that any interrelationship of parts and the whole must be viewed in political categories; it merely means that political theory employs organic and architectural metaphors which belong to the basic lexicon of the human language.[7] The word 'subordination', which is of crucial importance for Levy, in the Grimm brothers dictionary of the German language denotes, above all, a situation when someone is under the authority of someone else, which applies mainly to the organisation of the army.[8] The dictionary entry obviously mentions also the relationship between the lord and his subjects, but it refers as well to Arthur Schopenhauer who, in his *The World as Will and Idea*, used the terms 'co-ordination' and 'subordination' to make the distinctiveness of history among other scholarly disciplines more specific: 'History alone cannot properly enter into that series [of disciplines – W. B.], since it cannot boast of the same advantage as the others, for it lacks the fundamental characteristic of science, the subordination of what is known, instead of which it can only present its co-ordination'.[9] It means that the mere use of certain words cannot decide about their semantic tenor. Gurlitt or Brinckmann could use the terms 'co-ordination' and 'subordination' in the political sense, but it does not constitute a proof that Wölfflin did the same.

The extensive research apparatus and impressive diligence in supporting her arguments notwithstanding, Evonne Levy's book lacks reflection on the nature of the language of art history. The specificity of the discipline, that has to convert into words that which appears before the eyes, has been discussed many times.[10] The formulations used in the description and analysis of a work of art are, as Michael Baxandall put it, 'not so much descriptive as demonstrative'.[11] Therefore, in order to make the reader aware of how something looks, metaphorical phrases are often used, or else terms whose meaning is so broad that multiple detailed senses may be ascribed to them. 'Co-ordination' or 'subordination' are not attributes of architecture only. It is the researcher who, while trying to understand the principles underlying the form of a given building or style, names that what he has seen and conceptualised by means of metaphorically used terms denoting the relationship between parts and the whole and one another. The problem begins when such metaphors start to be treated as expressions which are unequivocal or at least have strictly defined connotations. And yet, the words 'co-ordination' and 'subordination' cannot be reduced merely to the political context associated with the authoritarian or oppressive state.

As a whole, Evonne Levy's book must be assessed most favourably. The author has showed the political circumstances, from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, in which the image of the Baroque in German art history was created – a no little contribution to the study of the history of the discipline. The high merit of the *Baroque and the Political Language of Formalism* depends also on the fact that it provokes to reflection and discussion, which is a privilege of important works only.

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[5] Ibidem, pp. 72 and 62.

[6] H.CH. Hönes, *Wölfflins Bild-Körper. Ideal und Scheitern kunsthistorischer Anschauung*, Zürich, 2011, pp. 41–44.

[7] G. Lakoff, M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, London, 2003, pp. 53–56.

[8] *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob und Wilhelm Grimm. 16 Bde. in 32 Teilbänden*, Leipzig, 1854–1961 (s.v. *Subordination*), <http://woerterbuchnetz.de/cgi-bin/WBNetz/genFOplus.tcl?sigle=DWB&lemid=GS55784> (accessed on 13 July 2017).

[9] A. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, trans. R.B. Haldane, J. Kemp, London, 1909, vol. 3, p. 221.

[10] M. Baxandall, 'The Language of Art History', *New Literary History*, 10, 1979, p. 455; M. Poprzęcka, 'Język historii sztuki a język polityki' [The language of art history and the language of politics], in eadem, *Pochwała malarstwa. Studia z historii i teorii sztuki* [In praise of painting. Studies in the history and theory of art], Gdańsk, 2000, pp. 34–38.

[11] M. Baxandall, 'The Language of Art History', p. 455 (as in note 10).